

### A Very Brief History of Right to Housing

Right to Housing has since 1985 as a statewide coalition of individuals and organizations that were concerned about homelessness and the related lack of affordable, decent housing in New Jersey. The organization was originally kicked off in August of 1985 at a meeting held at the state's Public Advocate's office. The need for a grassroots coalition to fight for housing and shelter rights had been a growing realization for a year or so prior to the group actually gathering together. The release of the Governor's Task Force on the Homeless, and the lack of any real initiative to institute some of the key recommendations certainly provided at least one impetus for grassroots advocates and providers.

At the same time, the Public Advocate and Legal Services of New Jersey (with some local Legal Aid and Legal Services groups) were beginning to develop a case on behalf of homeless welfare families who were being denied shelter around the state. The attorneys also felt that there was a need for a more focused, visible and vocal presence on behalf of homelessness issues.

From its very humble beginnings in August, 1985, Right to Housing began to grow in size, expertise and visibility. For two years it operated on an entirely volunteer basis. The Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless and the Association for Children of New Jersey donated a great deal in staff time and material resources. Other key groups in the very early stages of RtoH included Apostle's House and Ironbound Community Corporation in Newark; Food and Shelter, Inc. in New Brunswick; Paterson Housing Coalition; Food and Shelter Coalition of Hudson County; Lutheran Social Services (in New Brunswick); Community Mental Health Law Project and several legal aid representatives from various local offices. The Public Advocate would help out with certain mailings, etc., as well.

During those two years, the coalition undertook a series of activities, including:

- Trenton and local actions related to specific programs/issues

- Getting the word (and the bodies) out when grassroots testimony on legislation and regulations related to housing the homeless

- Letter writing campaigns

- A petition drive for a public right to shelter and housing

- Work on a bill that would eliminate the "fault" provision in EA regulations

- Assisting attorneys who were developing cases on behalf of homeless

- Development of a newsletter

In the summer of 1987, Right to Housing was awarded a grant from Hands Across America. It was the only housing advocacy group given a grant in the



state. The grant was used to hire a staff person to coordinate RtoH activities statewide. In September of 1987, Right to Housing began operations as a staffed entity.

In the years between then and March, 1989, Right to Housing continued to fight on behalf of homeless and housing poor people of the state. An activity of some sort: rally, Legislative lobbying day, Training sessions, Housing Justice Week, December camp-out in front of the State House, etc. etc., happened almost once a month. Public speaking and media relations ensured that the word was getting out. The crisis of almost 1400 families with children losing the little shelter they had once the new EA regulations went into effect in the spring of 1988 lead to a legislative lobbying day where representatives of the homeless from around the state came to meet with their legislators in the halls of the state house annex.

Legislation was passed that increased funding in some critical programs, but nothing was instituted that could help these families find and obtain affordable housing. RtoH asked for a meeting with the Governor at that point. Receiving no immediate response, about 200 people marched on Trenton in an action which, inadvertently, resulted in a "takeover" of the State House and the Governor's office in the spring of 1988. Thirteen people were arrested. A meeting between the Governor, 5 homeless women, 8 of their children and several support people *was* set up shortly after the action. The result was a series of meetings between this group and key Commissioners of the state over a few months. Later that year, a Family Shelter strategy was introduced and implementation started by the state Department of Human Services.

Throughout this time, RtoH also provided an almost-monthly newsletter to more than 1000 people around the state which updated news and information related to legislative, administrative, legal, or fiscal issues concerning the condition of the homeless in the state. Strong local coalitions in Monmouth, Camden, Burlington, Cumberland and Bergen Counties had joined much earlier with the other grassroots groups that were Right to Housing. It had grown to be a truly statewide presence.

In 1989, the staff person for Right to Housing left that position. A staff replacement was not hired, partially due to a lack of funds. Original Board members had also begun to move on -- or were increasingly finding themselves more and more involved in their local activities to address housing and shelter issues. A handful individuals in the Maplewood/So Orange part of the state offered to take on the responsibility for developing and sending out a bi-monthly newsletter. This continued until sometime in 1991.

Meetings of individuals and organization representatives who feel the need for some type of statewide coordination and communication have continued into the present. Today, in June, 1992, new faces and new energy are coming together with many of the "old guard" to develop a vision that will take the critical issues regarding housing and homelessness back into the public consciousness where they can be addressed.

522